

EXHIBIT 7

The Rise and Fall of the Pepsi to UFC's Coke: A Strikeforce Oral History

By Jonathan Snowden, Combat Sports Lead Writer Jan 11, 2013

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Strikeforce runs its final show this weekend to little fanfare. The promotion that once packed raucous crowds into the HP Pavilion in its home territory of San Jose, Calif., will go out with a bit of a whimper in Oklahoma City on Saturday night with Strikeforce: Marquardt vs. Saffiedine.

When the show goes off the air, it will mean the end of Strikeforce, a promotion that has survived 27 years in the tumultuous world of combat-sports

promotion. What's next for promoter Scott Coker is a mystery.

How did it come to this?

How did a promotion that once seemed on the verge of challenging the mighty UFC itself end up in the dust bin of history?

I talked with the most important players, the men and women who built the brand, to find out in this definitive oral history. This is Pt. 1 of the history of Strikeforce, in their words. Pt. 2 in this two-part series, chronicling the death of the promotion, may be found [here](#).

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Frank Shamrock (Strikeforce main event star and broadcaster): I knew Scott through Ernie Reyes Sr. Ernie was my student in mixed martial

arts and Scott was Ernie's student for many years. He received multiple black belts from him. Ernie was always learning in the martial arts, so when MMA came along he decided "I've got to study this." I became his teacher. I was 25 at the time; he was probably 55. That's how Scott and I got in the same circles. Scott was always a promoter. That was his journey. He was on the demo team and the promotions team for Ernie and he saw the promotional side, liked it and started promoting kickboxing.

Scott Coker (Strikeforce promoter): I was actually teaching at Ernie Reyes' school, a couple of classes a week, and I had a student there that said, "Hey, there's this Professional Karate Association, the PKA, and they're looking for a promoter in San Jose. Would you be interested in promoting?" I was 21 years old and had no idea what I was doing. So of course I said, "Sure, let's try it." That's how I got into promotion.

That first event, in March 1985, was held at the San Jose Civic Auditorium in front of a few thousand fans. Eventually, as a kickboxing promotion, Coker's Strikeforce ended up going worldwide. It was on ESPN almost immediately, starting in the fall of 1985, with fights featuring greats like "Bad" Brad Hefton, Dennis Alexio and future MMA trainers of note Javier Mendez and Mike Winkeljohn.

In 1992, ESPN launched "The Deuce"—a new network in desperate need of programming. Coker, now flying the ISKA banner, was more than willing to oblige with 30 hours of programming a year. With ESPN's backing, it became the first U.S. promotion

to hold a show at the Mecca of Thai boxing, the Lumpinee Boxing Stadium in Bangkok, and helped to introduce new stars like Alex Gong and Cung Le.

In 1999, Coker ramped Strikeforce back, making it a regional promotion again as he took an offer from K-1 to help launch the kickboxing powerhouse in America. From the Bellagio and Mirage hotels, K-1 ran shows on ESPN from 2000-2007.

Stephen Quadros (Former Pride and Strikeforce announcer): He had built the Strikeforce brand, which was originally a kickboxing-only platform, with a clear game plan that delivered decades of success. Scott wasn't some fast-talking jive-ass who thought he had all the answers. He was a calm, even media-shy thinker with drive, patience and humility. Bucking the vogue of the tyrannical-fight-promoter stereotype, Scott Coker was shockingly easy to work with.

Mike Afromowitz (Strikeforce media relations): When I first started working for Scott back in 2001, the first show I worked was K-1 USA. I remember Scott and I, Maurice Smith and Ray Sefo sitting in a suite at the Bellagio and talking about the potential launch of an MMA league. It went on the back burner as we developed K-1 USA, but we revisited it when MMA was going to be legalized at the end of 2005.

Coker: The reason we didn't get into promotion of MMA earlier, is that it was illegal in the state of California.

Josh Gross (ESPN senior MMA writer): There was a lot of "We'll get to it this year." But it just seemed

to take forever. There was confusion about rules, and in the end, bureaucracy was really the stumbling block. A ton of red tape and the state didn't do anything for six years.

By late 2004, Coker had his ear to the ground with contacts in the California Athletic Commission. When it was finally legal to put on an MMA show in California, he was going to be ready.

Coker: I went to the HP Pavilion and said, "Let's do this. Let's be the first ones. I think it will be historical." I'd had a promoter's license in California for more than 20 years—we should be the ones to get it.

I kept calling the commission and the legislation kept getting pushed back. Finally, I get a call, first week of January, from the athletic commissioner, Armando Garcia, saying, "The first date available is March 10. If you can make it happen, we'll give it to you." I called the arena, I called the fighters and the fight was pulled off in a very short window.

Strikeforce's first MMA event was headlined by Cesar Gracie and former UFC champion Frank Shamrock. He had been out of action for three years and his return was much anticipated in MMA's hardcore-fan community. It wasn't clear how the show would perform, or how competitive Gracie would be in his first official MMA fight.



Image via Strikeforce.com

Damon Martin (lead reporter, MMAWeekly.com): Strikeforce was a regional promotion out of San Jose—they didn't have a big television partner pushing them or the promise of pay-per-view. This was just a fledgling promotion making a push, putting a big fight together for their area and selling a boatload of tickets for a live show. Let's also not forget one of the guys in the fight, Cesar Gracie, had never even had a fight before that time. I mean that show did numbers UFC shows can't pull to this day. It really says something about what Strikeforce was able to do.

Afromowitz: It was the oldest rivalry in the sport. The two first families of the sport. It was on from there.

Shamrock: I saw a business opportunity. I'd never heard of the guy. But he had the Gracie name.

Coker: I told the arena, "Let's set it up for 7,000 people. I'm not sure what it's going to be like." I didn't know if it was going to be a hit or a bust.

Afromowitz: We didn't know what to expect. We

just kept opening sections of the arena to accommodate demand. Every media outlet in the Bay Area was covering it, for better or for worse. California legalizing it, there was controversy there. Curiosity was at its peak.

Shamrock talks up the Gracie fight

Coker: Frank's a great promoter. The guy had instant credibility and he can sell a fight like nobody else. Cause a lot of controversy, get people pissed off at him. To have a local guy as marketable as Frank out in front of the public was great. This was a great scenario. I figured that we'd at least get a base hit out of it. Or a double. But I think we got a grand slam out of the first one.

Shamrock: That last week before the fight, I knew we were riding something extraordinary. You could feel it. Because the news stations just kept calling and showing up and asking for more and more. I knew when I was live on the 5 o'clock news at the

weigh-in that it was bigger than big.

Gross: It wasn't a surprise to me because California was a hotbed for this sport. North and South, it had been going on for a long time, mostly on Native American lands. People would drive hours and hours to watch the sport. The fact that it was finally regulated and in a major building—the attendance, in the end, wasn't surprising. People were dying for it.

Cesar Gracie (Strikeforce fighter, trainer and manager): That's the thing, it started off with a bang, and I was happy to be a somewhat small part of that, and my fighters were a very big part of that and they had a lot of success there.

Coker: The San Jose Sharks partnered with us on the fight and they have big marketing muscle, a season-ticket-holder base and a good infrastructure. They got it out to the people, and that's one of the reasons we were so successful there. When they made the calls, the San Francisco Chronicle picked up the story. The *San Jose Mercury News* picked it up. They could get media that I couldn't have dreamed about.

Afromowitz: To look up at the arena and see every single seat filled, from the bottom all the way up to the stars—I couldn't believe it. 18,255 people and we had to turn people away, walk-ups. We might have been able to fill over 20,000 seats if the arena setup could have accommodated it.

Coker: The day before the fights, I get a call from the arena and they tell me we are sold out. I said, "Completely?" and they said, "Completely." And I

said, "I hope you saved my tickets for my friends and family." But of course, they didn't. So I was scrambling for tickets that night. It's a pretty good problem to have—but I have some friends that are pissed off still from that night.

The attendance set a North American record that would stand for almost a year before the UFC eclipsed it in Ohio in early 2007. More importantly, it immediately established Strikeforce as a promotion worth watching. The second event featured Vitor Belfort and Alistair Overeem in the main event and local star Cung Le lighting up the undercard. But there was trouble brewing in the form of Pro Elite, a new MMA promotion that signed Frank Shamrock to fight Renzo Gracie on Showtime.

The problem? Shamrock had agreed to terms with Strikeforce for his next bout.



Stephen Shugerman/Getty Images

Elite XC in its glory days.

Shamrock: I had this relationship with Strikeforce that included getting all these investments and really building the brand up, moving it in the right direction. I was constantly looking for financing and opportunities. So when Pro Elite came along, I went down there as a co-promoter and businessman. All they wanted was for me to fight for them. We signed an agreement that involved Strikeforce, the whole team. But when it came down to it, they weren't interested in teamwork. We just immediately butted heads and I got caught in the middle of it. It was supposed to be that we were all brothers. It ended up being the opposite. When it went to court, we all had to shut up and let someone else decide.

Rich Chou (Former Elite XC and Strikeforce matchmaker): When the dust settled, it required us

(Elite XC) to do co-promotions. We did two great shows together in San Jose, Frank versus Phil Baroni and Frank versus Cung Le. But it was a forced relationship and not a natural, organic relationship between the two organizations. Once we got there, we were civil and put on great shows together. But it wasn't really on the friendliest terms. We didn't sit down and break bread.

Gross: It was ugly. It was definitely an arrangement that was unique to mixed martial arts. It had to be that way because of the legal wrangling.

Coker: I think it was a big misunderstanding. I think it's something that worked out for us in the long run. If Frank had never done that, we wouldn't have co-promoted those events and we wouldn't have the relationship with Showtime that we ended up having to this day. Think about this—the two fights we co-promoted were Frank vs. Baroni and Frank vs. Cung. They both had huge gates. I think Frank's fight with Cung was our first gate over \$1 million. I'm sure it got Showtime's attention because they are coming to San Jose for these big fights. When they were traveling elsewhere with Pro Elite, I'm sure it wasn't as big.

The first co-promotion was a grudge match between Shamrock and Phil Baroni, a slugger who was a major star for Zuffa's UFC in the early 2000s. Once again hosted by the HP Pavilion in San Jose, almost 10,000 fans turned out to see the bout. Shamrock, known primarily as a grappler, had taunted Baroni mercilessly in several pre-fight videos, promising to knock him out. Would Shamrock stand and bang? The intrigue made the fight, which otherwise might

have seemed like a blasé affair, into an event.

There was also the undercurrent of something real amidst the pro-wrestling-style hype. Shamrock had once trained at the American Kickboxing Academy with fighters who were now Baroni's teammates. Some fighters at AKA felt Shamrock had been a bully and too aggressive in training, often injuring fighters he was working with. He was even accused of giving inside information to fighters competing with members of the AKA team. His departure was less than amicable, and the bad blood was legitimate.

Josh Thomson (AKA fighter and former Shamrock teammate): Frank had talked to Clay (Guida) right before I fought him and I heard all these reports that Frank was telling Clay all these things about me, my training, my grappling. It was a slap in the face. I'd trained with Frank all my UFC fights and he was one of my main sparring partners. It was a little bit of a betrayal.

Shamrock: Once again I saw an opportunity. Thomson was too small to fight me, but Baroni's a perfect character. I knew he was going to play his role, through and through. If you're going to tell a story, he's the guy you want opposing you. As soon as he opened his mouth, I thought, "Oh yeah, this is going to be a good one." I didn't know that it was going to have all the magic that it did.

Afromowitz: They had commentated a show together in December 2006. At one point during the show, Phil said to Frank, "Promise me you won't do that to me when we're fighting." And Frank said,

"Are you kidding me? I'm going to be standing over you while you're unconscious." Phil says, "I'm the NYBA Frank. I don't get knocked out." It was definitely interesting. I think they knew they were going to fight.

Gross: Frank is good for copy and headlines. He's a tremendous interview and obviously has a great history in this sport.

Shamrock's creative promotion techniques paid off

Coker: I still remember that rap video Frank did. "My name is Phil Baroni, I'm full of bologna." He made his own videos and created his own hype and storylines. Frank's a marketing wiz and he knows "I've got this fight, I want it to be big, and I want everyone to see this fight." And as the promoter, he'll go out there and do your job for you. It's great.

Thomson: It was corny. I remember all of us sitting around in the gym at AKA and we're all laughing our

asses off. We know Frank. It was just funny. We had a good laugh. There was really nothing else to do about it.

Afromowitz: We were rolling on the floor when we saw some of that stuff. Frank is like Muhammad Ali. He knows how to get in people's heads.

As the bout commenced, Shamrock made good on his promise to strike with Baroni. As his opponent faded, growing more tired by the second, Shamrock pantomimed a "nighty-night" gesture, like Baroni was a baby and it was time to go to sleep. Soon after, he dropped him and put him out with a rear-naked choke.



Photo by Scott Petersen, MMAWeekly.com

Shamrock: It just came to me. I was deep in Phil's head and riding this wave of chi. Everything was working, even though my knee was in bad shape and I could feel myself running out of steam. I knew I had to keep pounding on his psyche. I knew I was

on to something, battling him on the mental side. (The "go-to-sleep" gesture) popped right out. I didn't plan it. It happened in the moment.

Martin: Simply brilliant. One of the most brilliant in cage antics I've ever seen. Along with Nate Quarry chasing Kalib Starnes around the Octagon mocking him, it's definitely one of the funniest and most well-timed moments in MMA history.

In between mega events with Shamrock, the promotion continued to book regular shows, all in California, most in San Jose. Many top stars made appearances, but Coker credits two young stars, in addition to Shamrock and Cung Le, with making the company special.



Melendez and Thomson fought Strikeforce's greatest trilogy. Photo by Esther Lin/Forza LLC/Zuffa LLC

Coker: There are four fighters who were the pillar of our organization: Frank Shamrock; Cung Le, who fought with us since 1997; Gilbert Melendez and Josh Thomson. The company rode those guys' backs until we got the TV deal to take it to the next level.

Thomson: To this day, Coker will call me and say "Do you want to go play golf?" It's been a building of friendships from the beginning. He had a relationship with his fighters and that, to me, was something that I really counted on. He always delivered on what he promised me. I can't say enough about the guy. You could tell that the guy cared. You know how [Dana White](#) feels about [Forrest Griffin](#) and Stephan Bonnar? I think me and Melendez are Coker's Griffin and Bonnar.

Martin: Strikeforce did deserve the lion's share of credit for how a regional promotion should be built from the ground up. They stayed small and invested in local talent and grew over time. They didn't try to take over the world on day one and they didn't sign unnecessary TV deals just for the sake of getting on television. They were and remain the model for how a regional promotion can make it big.

Shamrock: Strikeforce was Scott's little team. You could fit them all in the palm of your hand. We were a startup. It was just a few us winging it.

Afromowitz: It was about building organically. We were fortunate because Frank had a name. Cung Le had a name in kickboxing. And from there, we built it. We promoted guys who were coming up, especially in our area. We had that home market.

Scott had built that market over the previous 25 years and he really owned that market.

Coker: In '06, '07, '08, we really did have a very small crew. And these guys worked their butts off. Everybody was 24/7, and we proved you can do it with a small crew and still do it very well. That came from the experience we had built of 20 years. We had done so many shows that we kind of had it down to a science.

By March 2008, Strikeforce was ready for another showdown, this time matching Shamrock up not with an established MMA star, but with local sensation Cung Le. A Strikeforce veteran from the kickboxing days, Le was a superhero to many in San Jose's Asian communities.

Spot for Shamrock-Le

Cung Le (martial arts superstar): He did a great job of promoting me on ESPN and ESPN2. I had my

second pro fight with him and have fought for him ever since. He was going to have his first MMA event at the HP Pavilion and asked me to compete, and I said I'd do it.

Coker: I first saw Cung fight in a traditional karate Shotokan tournament. He did traditional karate. He was a taekwondo guy. He did sanshou. He did kickboxing. He's a complete martial artist. It's not just a singular style. To me, it was like he can do anything. When it came time to do mixed martial arts, he said "I'm ready, I'm down, let's do this." There wasn't any hesitation.

Gross: Cung Le's influence and appearances at early Strikeforce events was really important to them. He played up his Vietnamese ties, and that was a major mover as far as getting people in the seats. The Cung Le-Shamrock fight was a really big one for the San Jose market. Frank made his home in San Jose like Cung. They were the linchpins of early Strikeforce shows. They put people in the seats and made people care.

Shamrock: We were going to fight over the city. That's how we laid it out, that's how I pitched it. It was the two super-tough locals going at it. The whole city had to choose sides. It was like old pro wrestling—a "loser leaves town" kind of thing.

Le: I knew what Frank brought to the table. He was definitely good at getting in a fighter's head before the fight. But I stayed focused...At the time, we were both big in San Jose, but Frank had come from UFC and was the middleweight champion of the world.

Shamrock: I remember doing an interview saying

we were fighting over two million people. And the guy tells me San Jose doesn't even have a million people.(Laughs). Everybody was so into that idea. Years later, people will tell me very seriously, "Oooh man, I was sitting on Cung's side for that one. But you've proven to be a good man." I'm like, "Whoa! We divided the city. It was pretty cool.

Many speculated that the bout would be decided by how well Le was able to defend Shamrock's takedowns and vaunted submission game. Instead, it was a standing battle that ended when Shamrock blocked a high kick that broke his arm.



Le brutalizing Shamrock via Strikeforce

Shamrock: It was the first time I'd really gotten hurt. In all this horrible stuff I've done. I thought, "Whoa, I can really get hurt doing this. I thought the doctors were

joking."

Coker: Cung Le, to this day, has more skilled striking than 99 percent of the MMA guys out there. He can strike with any MMA fighter on the planet. The question was, were they going to be able to take him down? And I knew Cung had a wrestling background. A lot of people didn't know that. So I felt really comfortable.

Le: During the fight, we had this banter back and forth. He hit me and said, "Hey that was two points.

I've got three points." So when I kicked him and knocked out his mouthpiece, I said, "Hey, pick up your mouthpiece. That's a point for me." It was just one of those great fights where you have a full three rounds to go back and forth.

Shamrock: As a martial artist, I discovered that there's always so much more to learn. Maurice Smith told me 10 years earlier that you have to block those kicks with two hands. And then he told me at the beginning of fight camp. But for whatever reason, I was like "Whatever." I was like an obstinate child because I wanted to do something else. I learned a lesson the hard way—breaking my arm.

Afromowitz: Cung really shocked the world with that win. He shocked himself if you look at the reaction. Frank tried to stand with him, though. You've got to respect that.

Le: I feel blessed to have that fight against Frank, to get pushed by Frank. It was one of my best performances and best fights that I've had. It's my favorite moment in Strikeforce and one of my toughest fights.

As Strikeforce continued to grow, Coker wasn't the only one convinced he had something special on his hands. He had built a strong working relationship with Silicon Valley Sports & Entertainment, a conglomerate that owns the HP Pavilion and the NHL's San Jose Sharks.

Coker: In the summer of 2008, they bought 50 percent of Strikeforce.

Afromowitz: They came in in 2008 as a partner.

They were a member of the arena network, which is a group of about 50 arenas throughout the country. They could get us in any arena in any market across the country. They really helped facilitate us moving into new markets. Definitely a valuable partner.

Coker: They brought a lot to the table. They pick up the phone and call the Izod Center in New Jersey; they know those guys. If it's somebody like myself, or somebody calling from the outside, I'm sure the deal that they got and the deal we would have got are much different.

Don't underestimate the (HP Pavilion) arena marketing, PR, the arena ticket sales department, the arena human resources department. All the infrastructure that Silicon Valley brought to our organization, including operations, was powerful.

After the Le-Shamrock fight, Strikeforce's promotional partner, Elite XC, imploded, leaving behind a collection of great fighters and a television contract with Showtime. Coker and his crew were ready and willing to jump into the danger zone and take a shot at the national stage.

Stephen Quadros: When EliteXC committed hari-kiri from what appeared to be operational gluttony, Showtime was looking for a viable replacement. When I was informed that it was to be Strikeforce that would become Showtime's new MMA brand, I was ecstatic. I had known Scott Coker for eons and had loads of respect for him as a man and especially as a promoter.

Coker: In the fall of 2008, I went to Silicon Valley



Scott Coker (Photo by Henry S. Dzialan III/Getty Images)

and said, "Here's an opportunity if you guys are interested. We have to do it very quickly." I explained to them about

Pro Elite and told them, "If you guys want to buy their assets, we can run for it." And they said, "Let's go for it." They invested a lot of money into this brand.

They saw Strikeforce as a great sports opportunity and agreed to buy the assets of Pro Elite. They could see there was something special going on. And that's when we went from a four-event-a-year regional show, although a big one with national fighters, to 16 shows a year. That's a much different animal. It was a little bit overwhelming, but we made it happen. It was definitely taxing on all of us so we started ramping up our staff. It was something we were learning as we went.

Rich Chou: I've really got to thank Showtime and a lot of the fighters and managers I was working with at Elite XC. They stepped up and vouched for me and got in Scott's ear about bringing me on...I wouldn't have blamed Scott if he didn't want to pick up some baggage like that. There was a ship that sunk, not because I didn't do my job, but I was afraid I was going to be collateral damage.

Afromowitz: It was the next logical step for us. We were three years into it. We had paid our dues. And we had something that was unique that we had built. It was exciting. I remember going out to L.A. for the kickoff press conference and waking up at 3 a.m. just to do a news show for a local affiliate. It was a lot of fun. We were running on momentum.

Chou: It was a really small company. It was a true family. I think the fighters felt it and I think ultimately the fans felt it. We had a lot of people rooting for us. It was like David versus Goliath. The little family against the corporate juggernaut.



**Mauro
Ranallo
(Former
Pride and
Strikeforce**

Mike Afromowitz via Strikeforce

announcer): They could have easily hired 100 different people like Elite XC. But look what happened with Elite XC. Strikeforce knew to start small, just like any other business.

Afromowitz: At most, we were 12 people. On the fight side, we were a very lean company. Twelve people running 16 events a year on Showtime. That's a lot of work. It was learning as you go and keeping that entrepreneurial spirit.

Coker: When we did a fight, it wasn't just our six or

eight or 10 staff members. The 100 people who worked at the arena were all pushing for us as well. They brought a lot to the table. When we went on the road, they'd send their operations department and their ticket department. There were a lot of people who came that don't get recognition, but they were on the road making stuff happen alongside us.

With the additional shows to fill, Strikeforce became a ravenous monster, scouring the world for the best fighters available. Rich Chou joined the team as the official matchmaker of record, but the promotion always took a committee approach to matchmaking. Chou was eventually joined by Shannon Knapp, formerly of the IFL and Affliction, but the one mainstay of the committee was American Kickboxing Academy trainer, and fighter manager, "Crazy" Bob Cook.

Coker: I'll tell you, Bob was so valuable to us. He was there way before we even started promoting MMA, talking about the sport and giving me advice. Because I really did not know a lot about who the fighters were other than the ones I watched on TV. I'd say Bob was our chief strategist for the fight part of the promotion.

Bob Cook at AKA

Gross: Coker's relationship with the gyms was a big deal. And it went beyond regular ties. Bob Cook was the one doing matchmaking for him and at the same time training fighters at the American Kickboxing Academy and operating as part of a management group with Zinkin Entertainment. There were a lot of ties and a lot of reasons fighters made it into Strikeforce. And the show benefited greatly from having access to that kind of talent.

Martin: It was an odd situation because no one from Strikeforce ever really acknowledged it publicly. We all knew Bob Cook worked there and fighters would mention it by name, but it was such an odd conflict of interest that you'd never see him at events or at press conferences, that sort of thing. Was there a conflict of interest? Absolutely. But do I think it ever instilled a sense of entitlement to the guys from AKA? I don't really think so.

Shannon Knapp (Invicta FC promoter and former Strikeforce matchmaker): Technically, it was a conflict of interest, certainly. But Bob's a good guy. And, the thing is, Bob wasn't the only matchmaker. It was always kept very honest. Rich and I were there and he didn't just make decisions like "I'm going to put my guy in and I'm going to pay him this much." There were times we said no. There

were times, too, that Bob would take less for his guy than I thought he was probably worth. There was give and take.

Afromowitz: The matchmaking was always done by committee. Rich, Shannon and Bob and, of course, Scott played a role in that as the promoter. Bob was one piece of the pie, but he was a very valuable asset. We couldn't have done it without him on board. Besides being a really good guy, he was trustworthy. And it's hard to find people like that in this business.

Gross: There weren't a lot of voices in Strikeforce, but those that were there all had Scott Coker's ear. They all had a chance to make their case, often at a bagel shop in San Jose that Coker loved. I think they handled it as well as they could.

Coker: At the end of the day, the decision was my decision.

[Click here for Pt. 2 of the series: The Death of Strikeforce.](#)